Which of Abrahim's son was sacrificed?

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Abstract:
The issue of the sacrifice of Abrahim's son remain an important bone of contention among the followers of Abrahamic religions. The Jews and Christians believe that it is Ishaq while among the Muslims some opine in favour of Ismail while favours Ishaq. To a common man it seems to be not an important issue whether it is Ismail or Ishaq but when its implications are taken into account then it is of great value to Muslims, Jews and Christians that who was sacrificed? Ismail or Ishaq. In the following pages an effort is made to look the issue in the light of some contemporary researches conducted in the Indo-Pak Subcontinent in the first half of the 20th century. Different positions on the issue are evaluated with the Quran and other holy scriptures and in the contemporary western scholarships.

Introduction

Religion has remained one of the main concerns of the human beings for the entire human history. Religious patriarchs and their associates have been given importance along with revelations. In religious history Abraham occupies a dominant place. The three major and important religions i.e. Christianity, Islam and Judaism of the world have connected themselves with Abrahim. The reason is that he was several times examined at different trials. This includes leaving his home and family, his dialogue with priests regarding the idols whom they worshipped. His encounter with the king Nimrod and his throw in the arranged fire by the king, having remained childless till the age of 86, his circumcises at the age of 86 (Biblical view) and the sacrifice of his son before God. When he became successful in all these trials he was selected for saintliness. Though all of trials are important but the most significant is the sacrifice of his son. There is a considerable difference among the Muslims, Jews and Christians about the son who was sacrificed. The holy Bible claimed that it was Ishaq. Quran is silent about the name of the person but the internal evidences supported the idea that it was not Ishaq but Ismail who was scarified by Abrahim.[1]

Importance for the Muslims

The answer to the question is important for the Muslims because;

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1. Islam traces back its history to Abrahim.
2. After Quran, Sunnah is the second source of *Din* and it is directly related to Abrahim and his traditions.
3. The Holy prophet Muhammad (SAWW)) has been portrayed as the promised prophet in the descendants of Abrahim.
4. Quran does not borrow ideas from any external source especially that of the Jewish or Christian sources regarding any narration of an historical event.
5. All the previous religious books are not authentic and it should be interpreted in the light of the Quranic teachings, as Quran is the final testament.
6. It is the coherence in the Quran, which is a determinant factor in the explanation of the Quran and it is above any personal view, whatever the status of that personality is.

Importance for the Jews and Christians:

The issue is important for the Jews and Christians as:

1. The whole explanation of the story of the Abrahim is correct and for that matter their scripture is valid. In the other case it will be invalid for the authenticity of their holy books.
2. The concept of the chosen people and a promised land, Israel among the Jews has relevance with Abrahim and his descendants from Ishaq.[2]
3. Muhammad (SAWW) is not the prophet designated due to Abrahim's request.
4. The descendents of Ishaq and not that of Ismail are the legitimate heirs for the guidance of humanity.

The Biblical View:

The story of Abrahim's son sacrifice is narrated as;

> "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, <u>your only son Isaac</u>, whom <u>you love</u>, and go to the land of <u>Moriah</u>, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid *it* on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the to of them went together. But Isaac spook to Abraham his father and said, My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where *is* the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abrahim

> said, My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on he altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, " Abraham, Abraham!" so he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him: for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind *him* was a ram caught in thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of place, The –Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, " In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided." Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven. And said; By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—"blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba."[3]

The claim of the Bible about Ishaq as the sacrificed one cannot be established on the following grounds;

1. It is very clearly stated in the text that Abrahim sacrificed **the only son**. It is an established fact that Ishaq was younger to Ismail. In fact Ishaq was born (when Abrahim was 100 years old)[4] fourteen years after Ismail (who was born when Abrahim was 86 years old)[5]. The sacrifice must have take place before the birth of Ishaq, because only in that case the only son would be Ismail. The explanation of the Christians exigists of the term **only son** is not enough as the same can be done to any term if not suited to one's own wishes.[6] Moreover, in history only first-born child and animals were sacrificed. Even the first ripen produce was surrender to the Deity. Henry Hart Milman reported as,

> "The immolation of human victims, particularly of the most precious, the favourite, the first-born child, appears as a common usage among many early nations, more especially the tribes by which Abraham was surrounded. It was the distinguishing rite among the worshippers of Moloch; at a later period of the Jewish history, it was practised by a king of Moab;

> it was undoubtedly derived by the Carthaginians from their Phoenician ancestors on the shores of Syria."[7]

If the offering of first child is shifted to another one then there must be some logical explanation, and the Bible is providing no such thing.

2. It was stated that the Abraham sacrificed the beloved son. There is no doubt that Ismail was the beloved son. First he was the first-born child. Secondly Ismail took birth after Abrahim's request to God. Thirdly he couldn't hide his love to Ismail when God hint at the birth of another child. When he was forecasted a second child, Abrahim said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You."[8] Fourthly when Sarah expressed her unwillingness that Ismail should share Ishaq in his father's heir, Abrahim was displeased very much.[9]
3. It was affirmed that Abrahim returned to Beersheba where he was living with Hajara and Ismail. It was the place from where he took Ismail to the altar for sacrifice. As far as Sarah was concerned, she lived along with Ishaq far away in territory of Canaan. Abrahim went there when she died. It is reported in the Bible, "So Sarah died in Kirjath Arba (that is, Hebron in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her."[10]
4. It was reported that the place where the act of sacrifice took place is Moriah. The Jews claim that it is the *Haikal-i-Sulman* while the Christians claimed that it is the place where Christ was crucified. Mawlana Hamiddudin Farahi discusses in detail the construction of the word Moriah and he believed that the original name was Marwah, which was changed to Moriah in the later period. The place is located where the Midianites (Descendants of Ismail)[11] were living and the land of Midianites is situated at the coast of Red Sea. There is no place under the name of Marwah in Syria where the Jews were residing.[12]
5. When God was predicting the birth of a child from Sarah He also promised him the establishment of His covenant with him and with his descendents.[13] The question arises that when God was promising His covenant with him and his descendents then how he could be selected for the sacrifice. In that case Abrahim would have been aware of Ishaq's living even when he was asked to sacrifice him. This makes no sense to sacrifice.
6. In Bible it is reported that all inheritance was given to Ishaq and Ismail was excluded from it. It is said, "And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had; and while he was still living he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east."[14]

One cannot imagine that a prophet like Abrahim would do injustice to his sons like Ismail to whom he loves a lot, and would not nominate him for inheritance. The only clarification is that Ismail was offered to God and according to the traditions an offered one was not entitle for any worldly belongings.

After describing the genealogies of Ishaq and Ismail, the holy Bible reported the location of their settlements. About Ishaq it was stated, "And it came to pass, after the death of Abraham, that God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac dwelt at Beer Lahai Roi."[15]

While Ishaq and his descendants were reported as, "They dwelt from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria.) And these people lived in front of their brethren"[16] The words 'in front of their brethren' cannot be understood unless we decide the centre from where we locate the front. It can be located only somewhere in South of Canaan where the descendents of Ishaq were residing. The Muslims believed that the place of sacrifice was in Marwah near Ka`aba and that Ka`aba was rebuild by Abrahim and his son Ismail and this place was declared as centre of religious activities. The Quranic view of the settlement of Ismail and his descendants in Arabia provide a sound explanation of the Biblical story of the settlement of Ismail. Moreover the Jews were instructed to move their faces towards South at the time of sacrifice.[17] And this South, while one is the Jewish settlement in Syria and Palestine lies in Arabia.

Quranic View:

As stated earlier that the issue of the sacrifice has been discussed in Quran but it did not mention the name of the sacrificed one. However the internal evidences show that it was Ismail and not Ishaq. The Quranic Sura narrated the story of Abrahim when he disappointed from his nation and decided to leave his hometown. In the words of Quran,

> "He said: "I will go To my Lord! He Will surely guide me! "O my Lord! Grant me A righteous (son)!" So We gave him The good news Of a boy ready To suffer and forbear. Then, when (the son) Reached (the age of) (Serious) work with him, He said: O my son! I see in vision That I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is Thy view!" (The son) said " O my father! Do As thou art commanded: Thou wilt find me, If Allah so wills, one Practising Patience and Constancy." So when they had both submitted their wills (to Allah), And he had laid him Prostrate on his forehead (for sacrifice), We called out to him, "O Abraham! Those who do right, For this was obviously A trial---And We ransomed him With a momentous sacrifice: And We left (this blessing) For him among generations (To come) in later times:" Peace and salutation To Abraham!" Thus indeed do We reward Those who do right, For he was one Of Our believing Servants, and We gave him The good news Of Isaac—a prophet, --- One of the Righteous, We blessed him and Isaac: But of their progeny Are (some) that do right, And (some) that obviously do wrong, to their own souls. Again, (of old) We bestowed Our favour On Moses and Aaron."[18]

1. In the above passage of the Quran, it shows that Abrahim requested for a son and God denoted him the birth of a child named Ismail. The name Ismail[19] in itself reveals that he was the result of his father's request. The Bible also said that Ismail was the first between the two children of Abrahim.
2. The act of sacrifice is described soon after the acceptance of Abrahim's prayer, which shows that it cannot be other then the one who was born due to the prayer of Abrahim. And there is no literary evidence, which obstruct this application. The placement of word *fa* between the prayer and its acceptance employ that it refers to the son, which was asked by Abrahim. Moreover, Bible also said that sacrifice was offered of the **only son.** It is suitably suggested that the sacrifice took place when Ishaq was not yet born to Abrahim. The Quranic passage shows that Ishaq was promised after the offering of Ismail.
3. There are two important adjectives used for Ismail and Ishaq. Ismail have been described as "a boy ready to suffer and forbear" and Ishaq as "a son endowed with knowledge." Both these adjectives depict the characteristics of these two important personalities. The adjective of Ismail is suitable for an action demanding a complete submission. He proved and qualifies himself when he showed his readiness to be sacrificed by his father before God. Moreover when Abrahim disclosed his dream to Ismail he, assured his father for his patience and constancy. Ishaq was made knowledgeable and prophet of God. Nowhere in the Quran Ishaq was portrayed which indicate to the issue of sacrifice.
4. In another occasion God pointed out the birth of a child to Abrahim which he and his wife, Sarah was not expecting. Quran says, "And his wife was standing (There), and she laughed: But We gave her Glad tidings of Isaac, And after him, of Jacob."[20]

This statement shows that Abrahim was foretold about not only Ishaq but his son Jacob also. This prediction would not have been given if Ishaq would have to be the sacrifice.

> "And remember that <u>Abraham Was tried</u> by his Lord With certain commands, Which he fulfilled: He said: I will <u>make thee An Imam to the Nations</u>." He pleaded: "And <u>also (Imam) from my offspring</u>!" He answered: But my Promise Is not within the reach Of evil-doers." Remember We <u>made the House A place of assembly</u> for man and a place of safety: And take ye the Station Of Abraham as a place Of prayer; and We <u>covenanted with Abraham and Ismail</u>, That they should sanctify My House for those who Compass it round, or use it As a retreat, or bend, or Prostrate themselves therein (In prayer). And remember Abraham said: "My Lord, <u>make this a City Of peace</u>, and feed its People With Fruits--- such of them As believe in God and the Last Day." He said: (yea), and such as Reject Faith, ---for a while Will grant them their pleasure, But will soon drive them To the torment of Fire,---

> An evil destination (indeed)!" And remember Abraham And Ismail raised The foundations of the House With this prayer: "Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: for Thou art the All-hearing, The All-knowing. "Our Lord! Make of us Muslims, bowing to Thy (Will), And of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Thy (Will): And show us our places For celebration of Thy rites And turn unto us (in Mercy); For Thou art the Oft-returning, Most Merciful. "Our Lord! send amongst them An Apostle of their own, Who shall rehearse Thy Signs To them and instruct them In Scripture and Wisdom, And sanctify them; For Thou art the Exalted, The Wise." And who turns away From the religion of Abraham But such as debase their souls With folly? Him We choose And rendered pure in this world; And he will be in the Hereafter In the ranks of the Righteous. Behold! his Lord said To him; "Bow (thy will to Me)": He said: "I bow (my will) To the Lord and Cherisher Of the Universe." And this was the legacy That Abraham left to his sons, And so did Jacob: "Oh my sons! God hath chosen The Faith for you: then die not Except in the Faith of Islam." Were ye witnesses When Death appeared Jacob He said to his sons: "What will ye worship after me?" They said: We shall worship thy God and the God of fathers, Of Abraham, Ismail, and Isaac, --The One (True) God: To Him we bow (in Islam)." That was a people that hath Passed away. They shall reap The fruit of what they did, And ye of what ye do! Of their merits There is no question in your case!"[21]

The above passage of the Quran shows that selection of holy prophet Mohammad (SAWW) is the result of the prayer of Abrahim and Ismail at the time of raising the foundation of Ka`aba. Due to Abrahim and Ismail and their efforts in the way of God, God sanctified the place where Ka`aba is located. God bestowed upon it, peace and prosperity despite of its insignificance and bareness. Abrahim and his sons were Muslims and so were their offspring who followed them.

History provides enough evidences that the Makkah and its inhabitants followed the path of Abrahim and Ismail for years. They worshipped the God of Abrahim and Ismail in the places constructed by Abrahim and Ismail. They remembered the act of sacrifice of Ismail and offered their own sacrifices whenever demanded. They provide peace to all those who visited the holy place particularly in the four months of the years. The guaranteed peace in Makkah made it a place of immense business activities also. Business and trade flourished in the area and Makkah became one of the prosperous centres in the Arabian Peninsula. In the seventh century Mohammad (PBUH) called to the teachings of Islam. More or less the people were aware with the concepts

propagated by Mohammad (SAWW). He tried to reform the society, which incorporated evils in the teaching of the early prophets. He frequently referred himself among the community of the messengers of God, sent to different nations of the world. He constantly reminded the followers of the holy books i.e. the Jews and the Christians to obey the teachings of their own holy books and do not astray from the right path. Instead of supporting the prophet they became hinderers in the way of the massage of Islam. They became ethnocentric. They closed their eyes to listen a person other than their own origin i.e. non-Jewish. They had built-up a disliking in their minds for all the gentile people. The concept of the chosen people corrupted them to the extent that they opposed the teachings of Islam, which was not repugnant to the original teachings of the earlier revelations. The claims of Mohammad (SAWW) regarding his connection with the earlier prophets were given no heed. Mohammad (SAWW) not only corrected the teachings of the earlier prophets but also provided a yardstick, Quran for guidance for the entire human beings and for all the times to come. Quran has put right all the previous narratives contaminated by the Jews and the Christians.

It is objected by some of the Orientalists that importance of Abrahim and Ismail took place in the Madina period only. The Makki suras of the Quran had little reference to Abrahim and Ismail. The preference to Abrahim and Ismail in latter period is contributed to Mohammad (SAWW)'s interaction with the Jews and Christians in Madina.[22] It is objected that in the following suras; 19:49, 21:72, 29:27, 6:84, 11:7 a reference have been made to Isaac and Jacob but Jacob appears as another son of Abrahim and not as his grandson. But during the Madinan period Jacob is no longer considered as another son but in accordance to the Biblical genealogy as Abrahim's grandson. It was claimed that on certain occasions (19:54, 38:48, 19:85, 6:86) when Ismail is mentioned he appears without any reference to the person and history of Abrahim.[23] And it appears that Mohammad (SAWW) was not well informed about the family relationship between Abrahim and Ismail.[24] Edmund Beck opined that the name of Ismail is later addition to the two verses 125 and 127 of Surah II, which is Madinan.[25] Richard Bell considered that the sacrifice of Abraham's son described in 37:102-07 is a later Madinan addition and further concludes that verse 101 probably referred to Isaac, but when Ismail began to assume importance to Mohammad (SAWW), it was taken as referring to him and verses 112 and 113 added.[26]

These objections are not valid. Primarily these objections on the Quran are due to their lack of understanding the style of the Quran. For instance Quran is not mentioning any story in detail in one place. It discusses one instance in one place but describe another aspect in another place. It also discusses only the reformative aspect and it suppose to remind the underlying lesson in the story to addressees. In many occasion it only refer to the event avoiding the detail because the Arabs were aware of that story.

The division between Makki and Madani Suras on the basis of political and situational compulsions and expediencies is not correct. This hypothesis cannot be accepted on the basis of the universal message of Islam. No doubt the

Quran revealed slowly and gradually and took about twenty-three years to complete but there is no contradiction in its contents. As far as the Biblical influences on the Quran is concerned it is clear from the issue concerned that Quran does not need to have a sanction from the previous holly books for any of its teaching or an episode in history. Instead it rectified many of the Biblical teachings and characters to its original place. The importance of the Quran in this respect has been recognised by many experts. A researcher in the oriental studies, after discussing the two terms, Nasara and hanif concluded as saying, "… And it is its peripheral nature, its living contact with forgotten fossils of world religions that make the Quran a vitally important source also for the history of Christianity."[27]

Conclusion:

The name of the son of Abrahim, who was sacrificed, has no significance apparently. However, the issue is having far reaching consequences for Islam. One could hardly understand why the issue was not given due importance by the Muslim scholars in the past. No doubt they expressed their views but there is no final verdict on the issue. The reason may be that Quran in itself is silent over the name. Majority of the Ulama favoured Ismail on the basis of certain traditions of the Holy Prophet. But when the issue of authenticity of the traditions was raised and some of the ulama supported the opinion in favour of Ishaq, the issue became more complicated.

The issue was given due attention in the beginning of 20th century by Imam Hamiddudin Farahi. He had close contacts with some of the Orientalists in India. He also had a good command over the pre-Quranic holy books. Farahi thoroughly scrutinised the issue and substantiated his views with frequent citation from the Biblical sources. He decided in favour of Ismail on the basis of Quranic evidences, which are enough for the decision of any matter. His work also validated the importance of the concept of coherence in the Quran for the understanding of Quran. The Quran became the final judge in all religious questions as it claimed for itself in the text.

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[1] There are some Muslim Ulama who also support the opinion in favour of Ishaq for example Ibn Jarir and some are not clear about any one while a large numbers are in favour of Ismail as the sacrificed one.

[2] The significance is clear from the following statement, 'The Holy One, blessed be He, created days, and took to Himself the Sabbath; He created the months, and took to Himself the festivals' He created the years, and chose for Himself the Sabbatical Year; He created the Sabbatical years, and chose for Himself the Jubilee Year; He created the nations, and chose for Himself Israel…. He created the lands, and took to Himself the Land of Israel as a heave offering from all the other lands, as it is written: 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof'. Midrash Tehillim 24:3, quoted by Paul Johnson, *History of the Jews*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1987, pp.19, 595.

[3] Genesis 22:1-19, Holy Bible (The New King James Version) Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980

[4] Genesis 21:5, Holy Bible (The New King James Version) Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980

[5] Genesis 16:16, Holy Bible (The New King James Version) Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980

[6] They said that Ishaq is considered as the only son because he was living with Abrahim alone while Ismail was away with his mother Hagara.

[7] Henry Hart Milman, *The Story of Jews*, Darf Publishers Limited, London, 1986, 10.

[8] Genesis 17:18.

[9] Genesis 21:10-11.

[10] Genesis, 23:2

[11] *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, 1987.p. 296

[12] Imam Hamiddudin Farahi, *Al-Ray al Sahih man hwa al-Zabih* translated in Urdu by Imam Amin Ahsan Islahi, Markazi Anjuman Khudam-ul-Quran, Lahore, 1975. pp. 22-28

[13] Genesis 17:19.

[14] Genesis 25:5-6

[15] Genesis 25:11

[16] Paidaish 25:18, *KitabiI-Mqadas yani Nia awr Purana Ahad Nama*, Bible Society, Lahore; In the King James Version the last words are omitted and instead it is said that He (Ismail) died in the presence of all his brethren.

[17] Exodus, 27:9

[18] Al-Saffat, 99-114.

[19] It's meaning is "God has hearkened", suggesting that a child so named was regarded as the fulfilment of a divine promise. *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 7 p.296

[20] Hud 71.

[21] Al Baqra, 124-34.

[22] Snouck Hurgronje and Wensinck wrote, 'Muhammad was able to free himself from contemporary Judaism by attaching himself to the Judaism of Ibrahim, which Judaism was the forerunner of Islam.' The French Jesuit Lammens did not hesitate to describe Islam as the 'Arab adaptation of Biblical monotheism'. (Dominique Sourdel, *Medieval Islam*, Routhledge &Kegan Paul, Great Britain, 1979. p. 5)

[23] *Encyclopaedia Islam*, Vol. VIII, E.J. Brill, 1979, pp. 980.

[24] *Encyclopaedia Islam*, Vol. IV, E.J. Brill, 1978, p. 184.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Francois De Blois, 'Nasrani and hanif studies on the religious vocabulary of Christianity and Islam', *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, 65, 1, (2002) p.30

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